

SWOT OR SOAR?

WHAT ARE THE KEY DIFFERENCES IN THESE PLANNING TOOLS AND WHEN SHOULD THEY BE USED?

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INTRODUCTION

Strong analysis is the backbone of every good planning process – whether it's for a project or a program, organizational operations, strategic planning, or a transformational revisioning.

But depending on the type of planning your organization is doing, you'll want to explore and employ different tools.

In this presentation, I explore the difference between two common tools:

- SWOT – Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities, Threats
- SOAR – Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results

So let's get into it – what are the differences, the strengths, the limitations? And when can they be used to greatest effect?

SWOT: WHAT IS IT?

- The SWOT analysis tool was developed in the 1960s by Albert Humphrey at the Stanford Research Institute.
- It was created in response to Humphrey's observation that planning processes were consistently failing businesses. Later, it was adopted more broadly, including by the non-profit/charitable sector.
- It seeks to identify and quantify the external challenges and internal capabilities of a business/organization to support strong decision making.
- It does this by gathering key stakeholders and decision-makers to ask a series of questions about these challenges and capabilities, resulting in more detailed view of these factors.

SWOT: SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK

- Strengths:
 - What do we do exceptionally well? Where are we having the greatest impact?
 - What are our core competencies and/or unique resources?
 - What strong relationships do we have with the community we serve, with funders/donors, with other stakeholders?
- Weaknesses:
 - What skills gaps do we have with staff, leadership, or board?
 - Are we limited by outdated systems, training, or technology?
 - Where is a lack of funding limiting our potential?
- Opportunities:
 - What's happening externally that we can benefit from (new funding, new technology, new legislation etc.)?
 - What internal strengths can we leverage?
 - What partnerships or collaborations can we deepen to advance our goals?
- Threats:
 - Are there changes in funding trends or program costs that may limit us?
 - Are there regulatory, policy, community or other changes that may impact our goals?
 - Are there any reputational or staffing risks that we are facing?

SWOT: WHEN SHOULD YOU USE IT?

- The SWOT tool focuses on analytical and evaluative elements. It centers objectivity and critical analysis, particularly in looking at risk and problems. It can be used to great effect for:
 - Identifying and managing risk
 - Planning a short-term project
 - Undertaking a situational analysis when launching a new program, expanding into a new community, or serving a new clientele
 - Assessing existing programs
 - Benchmarking existing work against identified standards

SWOT: WHAT ARE ITS LIMITATIONS?

- SWOT offers a snapshot of a single moment in time for an organization, project or program and may miss evolving or dynamic elements in a landscape.
- In general, it will require additional work to develop key performance indicators (KPIs) or other measures to be operationalized.
- It can be difficult to categorize different factors – for example, a new funding stream can be both an opportunity (for new programs) or a threat (to existing funded programs).
- It can lead to a fixation on weaknesses or threats which can create negativity or inaction in a team or organization.
- For these reasons, it is generally not suitable for strategic visioning and planning, or building team alignment for change.

SOAR: WHAT IS IT?

- The SOAR analysis was developed by Jacqueline Stavros, David Cooperrider and D. Lynn Kelley in 2003 as a response to the SWOT tool
- It forms the foundation of the Appreciative Inquiry approach – fostering creativity through positive inquiry
- The creators were seeking to center strengths, rather than deficits, in the planning process by identifying future opportunities and aspirations, encouraging collaboration, and defining what success would look like
- It does this by gathering key stakeholders and cross-functional teams to explore questions related to these factors, resulting in a forward-thinking and positive organizational perspective

SOAR: SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK

- Strengths:
 - What are we doing (or what have we done) that we want to build on?
 - What are we most proud of?
 - What makes our organization, our programs, our work, unique and special?
- Opportunities:
 - What changes do we expect to see in our community, with our clients, with our funding, in the next 3-5 years?
 - What partnerships or collaborations are we part of that would advance our goals?
 - Where can we really make a difference in community? What is our untapped potential?
- Aspirations:
 - What do we want our community to look like in the future?
 - What difference do we hope to make (what is our role)?
 - What programs, strategies, processes and talents do we have that support our goals?
- Results:
 - Considering what we've identified above, what results do we want and in what timeframe?
 - What can we reasonably measure that will show us whether we are on track to achieve our goals?
 - What systems or resources do we need to track these measures?

SOAR: WHEN SHOULD YOU USE IT?

- The SOAR analysis tool is designed to support generative and strategic thinking through building on an organization's strengths to grow. Its focus is forward-thinking, positive, and motivational and can be used to great effect for:
 - Strategic planning and goal setting
 - Creating a compelling vision for the future
 - Aligning teams around purpose and measurable outcomes (results), particularly during times of transformational change
 - Fostering collaboration, building consensus, and encouraging stakeholder participation

SOAR: WHAT ARE ITS LIMITATIONS?

- SOAR can lead to being overly optimistic or creating unrealistic aspirations, lacking in specificity and detail.
- It generally requires a high level of participation, especially around defining results, from decision-makers and cross-functional teams.
- It runs the risk of ignoring or minimizing threats to the organization and weaknesses within it by focusing on strengths. This can lead to a false sense of security amongst team members or leadership.
- For these reasons, SOAR is generally not suitable for detailed evaluations, environmental scans and risk assessments.

A QUICK COMPARISON

FEATURE	SWOT	SOAR
Components	Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats	Strengths, opportunities, aspirations, results
Perspective	Analytical, diagnostic & evaluative	Generative, aspirational & strategic
Focus	Past/present 'as-is'	Future 'to-be'
Goals	Address problems and risks	Build on strengths to grow
Tone	Objective and critical	Positive and motivational
Best for	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Risk management• Short-term project planning• Situational analyses• Program assessments• Benchmarking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strategic planning & goal setting• Visioning• Aligning teams around purpose & results• Fostering collaboration• Building consensus & participation

ADDITIONAL LINKS

- Appreciative Inquiry: <https://centerforappreciativeinquiry.net/resources/what-is-appreciative-inquiry-ai/>
- Creately: <https://creately.com/guides/soar-vs-swot/>
- workflow: https://youtu.be/m_JguG0IIAI
- Community Evaluation Solutions: <https://www.communityevaluationsolutions.com/soar-template-nonprofits>
- Founder to Fulltime: <https://youtu.be/s78fhXnITOw>

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